

Miriam Margolyes is one of Britain's best-loved actresses, who has starred in TV, film and theatre ranging from *Blackadder* to *Harry Potter*. She explains why she has never let fame go to her head

BY JONATHAN WHILEY

Meeting Miriam

Below: Miriam as Professor Sprout in the *Harry Potter* films



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AFTA-winning actress Miriam Margolyes OBE opens the door of her basement flat with a beaming smile. "Come in, come in!" she says warmly in the characterful accent so familiar from stage and screen and countless voiceover roles.

After being ushered into her beautifully modern kitchen – sunlight streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the back garden – she hands me a packet of dark chocolate digestives and a mug of tea.

A Sainsbury's delivery has not long since arrived and between answering questions, she nibbles her way through a plateful of raw vegetables, crunching at whole spring onions vigorously.

Miriam has just returned from China where she has been filming the third series of BBC travel series *The Real Marigold on Tour*, alongside Wayne Sleep, Bobby George and Rosemary Shrager.

"It's quite fun with them because it's interesting to go on holiday with people you don't necessarily choose to go on holiday with," she says. "We have all become very good friends actually."

Miriam says that India has been her favourite place to visit as a group. "India is just wonderful; it's an amazing country," she says. "The people are so lovely, so warm and welcoming and so kind."

As is Miriam, who is among a star-studded line-up of celebrities who will be making an appearance at Kids for Kids' candlelit Christmas concert at St Peter's Eaton Square on November 30.

"I make a point of doing things at Christmas time because I'm Jewish and I think it's very important that it should be seen that people from other faiths can contribute," she says. "There is a perception that Jews only do charity for Jews, but that's not the case."

She will be joined by the likes of Timothy West, Lord Cope and Joanna Lumley as the charity raises money to improve the lives of children in Sudan.

"Joanna is an old friend of mine," she says. "We were in a film in Los Angeles – *James and the Giant Peach* – and we played sisters. She was the beautiful sister and I was the ugly one. We were both evil and we had great fun."

A veteran of stage and screen, Miriam's effervescent personality and penchant for character roles has seen her become one of the country's best-loved stars.

In the 1980s she was known for a multitude of fruity roles in sitcom *Blackadder*, with a memorable turn as Queen Victoria to Jim Broadbent's Prince Albert in *Blackadder's Christmas Carol*.

"Blokes often quote bits of script at me," says Miriam. "Lady Whiteadder is one of their favourites because she was so rude, without intending to be of course. I loved *Blackadder* and it was a great honour to be in it."

Miriam won a Bafta for best supporting actress in 1994 for her role as Mrs Mingott in Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* and two years later, she was cast as the nurse in Baz Luhrmann's Hollywood production of *Romeo + Juliet*.



“Fame can make you think you’re more important than you are”



Miriam in the BBC series *The Real Marigold on Tour*, alongside Wayne Sleep, Bobby George and Rosemary Shrager

However it’s a more recent role – Professor Sprout in the Harry Potter films – which is the one that she is most recognised for. “When we were in China they would say, ‘Harry Potter! Harry Potter!’ and they were very excited. That’s lovely, I feel very grateful.”

Her personal favourite was playing predatory Hollywood agent Sue Mengers in one-woman show *I’ll Eat You Last*. “I was pleased because I got very good notices for it, which we pretend we don’t care about, but of course we do.”

She says she isn’t passionate about TV and film in the same way she is about theatre work and radio. At 76, she still hopes to continue doing theatre work but admits that it has to be the right project.

She recently turned down the chance to reprise Queen Victoria in a theatre adaptation of Judi Dench film *Victoria & Abdul*. “I felt it [the play] didn’t give Victoria’s part in enough detail,” she says. “I’ve played Queen Victoria twice in different things. She is one of my heroes.”

Another big idol was tennis star Martina Navratilova. “I thought she was absolutely wonderful,” says Miriam. “And Billie Jean too. The fact that she was gay of course – so was Billie Jean but we didn’t know that then – made her doubly interesting to me.”

Sir Laurence Olivier is the only person who has made Miriam feel starstruck. “When I met him I felt adoration,” she says.

Despite a starry career, Miriam is aware of the dangers of celebrity. “It can make you think you’re more important than you are,” she says. “You have to not think that you are special, because that is dangerous.”

Miriam is always aware of her own behaviour. “The only time I’ve really been rude to somebody is when they stopped me as I was going to the ladies,” she says. “She got a mouthful but I really wanted to wee badly. She blocked the door.”

Genealogy remains her passion in life and recently she discovered long-lost family in America. “One day I rang them up and I said, ‘Is that Mr Mitchell?’ and he said, ‘Yeah, who is this?’ I said, ‘You don’t know me, but my name is Miriam Margolyes and I’m a British actress. The reason I’m ringing you is that I believe we’re related and your grandfather was Jewish.’

“He said, ‘Jewish? Are you kidding? We’re Catholic, my dad was an anti-semitite if anything, he didn’t like Jews.’”

She sent him proof that they were second cousins once removed – photographs, birth certificates, obituaries – and called back five days later.

“I said, ‘Hello Mr Mitchell, this is Miriam Margolyes speaking’. There was a short pause and then he said, ‘Shalom’.”

Incredibly, 67 members of the family turned up for the reunion in the US. “I felt very emotional,” she says. “They could not have been nicer.”

After an hour in Miriam’s company, I could say the same.

The Kids for Kids candlelit Christmas concert takes place at St Peter’s Eaton Square on November 30 from 7pm. For tickets, visit kidsforkids.org.uk



Vibrant Victoria

Guests enjoyed champagne and canapés at The Goring as the Victoria BID launched its Vibrancy Report 2017.

Victoria BID chief executive Ruth Duston introduced the report, which outlines current projects in Victoria, in addition to recommendations for the future.

The BID area supports 43,000 jobs with Victoria contributing £105 million in business rates to the economy every year.

